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Date:

## JAPANESE AND EUROPEAN FEUDALISM

Read the selection below comparing and contrasting feudalism in Japan and Europe, and complete the chart.

Japan's feudal culture was in many basic ways more like that of feudal Europe than China. The warriors, who were known by the generic term of *samurai* "servitors," placed great emphasis on the military virtues of bravery, honor, self-discipline, and the stoical acceptance of death. Lacking any religious injunctions against suicide, they commonly took their own lives in defeat, rather than accept torture and possible humiliation in capture. Suicide by the gruesome and extremely painful means of cutting open one's own abdomen became a sort of ritual used to demonstrate will power and maintain one's honor. Vulgarly called *harikiri*, or "belly-slitting," but more properly known as *seppuku*, this form of honorable suicide has survived on occasion into modern times, and suicide by less difficult means is still considered an acceptable and basically honorable way to die.

The prime virtue in the Japanese feudal system, as in that of Europe, was loyalty, because the whole system depended on bonds of personal loyalty. Of course, loyalty was in actuality the weakest link in both systems, and the medieval stories of both Japan and Europe are full of cases of turncoats and traitorous betrayals. In Europe, with its background of Roman law, the lord-vassal relationship was seen as mutual and contractual – in other words, as legalistic. In Japan, the Chinese system has placed less emphasis on law and more on morality – that is, on the subordination of law to the moral sense of the ruler, since his right to rule was theoretically based on his superior wisdom and morality. Hence, the lord-vassal relationship was seen as one of unlimited and absolute loyalty on the part of the vassal, not merely one of legal contract between the two. There was thus no room for the development of the concept of political rights, as happened in the West...

Still, family lineage and honor were of great importance in medieval Japanese society, because inheritance determined power and prestige as well as the ownership of property. Family continuity was naturally a matter of vital concern. The Japanese avoided many of the problems of Western hereditary systems, by permitting a man to select among his sons the one most suitable to inherit his position and also by using adoption when there was no male heir by birth. The husband of a daughter, a young relative, or even some entirely unrelated person could be adopted as a completely acceptable heir. While inheritance is no longer a keystone of Japanese society, these types of adoptions are still common.

Japanese feudal society differed from that of Europe in two other revealing ways. In Japan there was no cult of chivalry which put women on a romantic pedestal, as though they were fragile, inferior beings. The Japanese warriors expected their women to be as tough as they were and accept self-destruction out of loyalty or family. Also Japanese warriors, though men of the sword like their Western counterparts, had none of the contempt that the Western feudal aristocracy often showed for learning and the gentler arts. They prided themselves on their fine calligraphy or poetic skills. Perhaps the long coexistence of the culture of the imperial court with the rising warrior society of the provinces had permitted a fuller transfer of the arts and attitudes of the one to the other.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 56-58  
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<b>S I M I L A R</b>	<b>Feudal Japan</b>	<b>Feudal Europe</b>
	1.	
	2.	
	3.	
	4.	
	5.	
<b>D I F F E R E N T</b>	1.	
	2.	
	3.	
	4.	
	5.	